How To Welcome A Savior
Matthew 21:1-14
April 3, 1977 - Palm Sunday

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For all the glorious music and full Sanctuaries and happy faces, it remains an ambiguous day for thoughtful people. There are times when the New Testament ought to make even devout Christians a bit uncomfortable. Palm Sunday is one of those occasions for me. It is all so terribly human and so easy to understand. Our Lord was welcomed to a city by people who didn't know Him: and their welcome lasted just as long as it took Him to reveal Himself. When He did that, the crowd vanished, the good will became anger, and the "Hosannas" began to sound like "crucify him". And all of that makes me uncomfortable.

William Stringfellow suggests that Christians keep returning to Palm Sunday out of nostalgia for the parade. He writes: "If the work of Christ would only end in that way, Christians would be spared the betrayal of Judas, the apathy and cowardice of the other disciples, the mystery of the Last Supper, and Gethsemane's sweat and agony." (Free in Obedience). It was a triumphant entry: but it was also - we must never forget - the prelude to crucifixion.

Why, one almost has to ask, did He come to Jerusalem in the first place? Why did He behave the way He did when He arrived in the city? He was not very prudent or discreet. Rather He appears to have gone out of His way to be troublesome. The answer may be in another question. What would you do if you knew you were going to die in a matter of weeks? You would, I propose, tend to some unfinished business. You would say some things you have been holding inside for a long time. You would be inclined to throw discretion to the wind and tell some people how much you love them: you might even tell a few the exact opposite. You might take a stand or two that would surprise some people. Almost all of the literature about Abraham Lincoln points to his sharp sense of his own mortality. He had, apparently, an intuition that He would not live long which added tremendous impetus to His difficult decisions. Some of the very best art and literature have resulted from the same intuition. To know that time is limited is to know, apparently, what one must do.

You cannot read the New Testament without noticing that Jesus sensed the brevity of the time He had. He knew that He was a wanted man. The Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Judaism, had decided, several months before, to have Him arrested when the opportunity presented itself. And so His coming to the city, I think, falls into the category of those things He felt He must do before He died. Once there His behavior grew out of the same motivation. When He erupted in anger in the outer court of the Temple, it was the intentional gesture of a man who had something to say and only one opportunity to say it.

You know the story of this day. His permanent home, apparently, was in Galilee, in the city of Capernaum. Matthew, Mark and Luke indicate that while He traveled widely around Galilee, He had never been to the city itself in His three years of public ministry. When He made the decision to go to the Capital for Passover the disciples were wary, with good reason. They knew well that something decisive was going to happen and they were understandably afraid. He had become quite well known in Galilee: everywhere He went people gathered, some because of His reputation for healing, some to hear Him teach, some wanted to make Him King, and some were beginning to whisper that He was the Messiah. In Jericho a blind man had called Him just that.

The journey was a long one: the final leg up the treacherous road from Jericho. That road must have been crowded during the week before Passover. Jerusalem swelled to several times its normal size from the influx of religious pilgrims. Passover, after all, was essentially a patriotic celebration of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery. And I've always imagined that road as an exciting, happy place to be: friends, neighbors, whole families, young and old on their way to the Holy City for a holiday. I imagine spirits running high, people laughing and singing, children playing, a general exhilaration not unlike the feeling of turning the family car onto the Interstate for summer vacation. And I imagine the news flying up and down that road, "Jesus of Nazareth is coming too." They were the ones, in fact, who would greet Him when He arrived. The city, at least at first, was as uninvolved in the ensuing demonstration as are the residents of New York when the Corn Growers come to town for a convention.

Jesus and His small traveling party made for Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. Their friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived there and apparently that is where they spent Saturday night. During the evening Mary anointed His feet with precious perfume: a gesture which intrigues scholars of the New Testament. Was it a symbol of a King's anointing - or was it an anointing for death? Judas, for one, was distressed by it all.

The next morning, the first day of Passover week, He began to act very deliberately. Having come all this way by foot, he requested a donkey for the last few miles. Thus He rode into the city, and the Galileans who knew Him or about Him, the country folk on holiday in the big city, were there to greet Him. What they saw must have taken their breath away. One of their favorite passages of scripture was the Messianic Prophecy of Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass."

They erupted - literally. Having come to the city to observe the Passover, they were suddenly caught up in the possibility that the rumors about Him were true, He really was the Messiah. They were about to witness the establishment of the Kingdom of God. He was saying as much. And so they tore branches from the trees and their coats from their backs to lay in His path. They knew how to welcome a savior. As the now noisy demonstration moved in the direction of the Temple the intensity would have amplified. Skeptical Jerusalemites began to get nervous: "Who is this?" they asked. In the Temple, the people thought, Jesus would sieze power and begin what was looking and feeling like a revolution .

What happened next did not dissuade them. The outer court of the Temple was public space: Gentiles were welcome there and could,if they chose, use it for worship and prayer. But in 33 A.D. the outer court was used for another purpose. Gifts and tithes and temple taxes, by law,had to be made in Jewish coinage. So, tables were arranged for exchanging Roman money for appropriate coins - for a fee. In addition, the law prescribed that only animals which were with blemish could be offered as sacrifice. A man wouldn't carry a dove or a lamb from Galilee for the purpose, and so Temple authorities had arranged for pre-inspected sacrificial animals to be on sale. It was a noisy, raucous, smelly display and, by the way, an immensely profitable operation for the families which had a hold on the office of High Priest.

Jesus, with His band of demonstrators tagging along, took one look and in anger turned over the tables of the money changers and drove out the salesmen and their stock. That too was a prophetic gesture: "the Lord whom you seek will suddenly

come to his Temple...but who can endure the day of his coming?" the prophet Malachi had asked; "For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap."

That was the high point. The moment was right: the opportunity was there. All He had to do was say the words "I am your king." But instead, He sat down, and of all things, blind people, crippled people, sick people, came to Him and He healed them. After a while He got up and left and went back to Bethany for the night. The crowd was gone: the savior they welcomed wasn't the savior they expected. The scene was set for their frustration to become scorn: for the city authorities to step in and take the initiative. The day which had begun with such promise had made the crucifixion inevitable. But Jesus had done what He had to do.

That, it seems to me, is the first lesson to be learned by twentieth century Christians on palm Sunday. Jesus must be welcomed or accepted on His terms, not ours. The Christian Faith, simply put, is defined by Him, not us. And it begins, if He is doing the defining, in some act of lonely decisiveness; some personal commitment; some courageous choice. That is the essential to the Gospel. When Jesus came into Jerusalem He forced people into the uncomfortable position of having to make a decision. Polite neutrality was not possible.

I was intrigued recently by the content of a book written by the Austrian psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, The Unconscious God. The author describes the continuing human dilemma as one of meaninglessness; lack of purpose and direction; absence of hope in the future. He sees evidence of the "existential vacuum" all over the world. People, he observes, have lost their way: trusted authorities have betrayed them: traditional institutions have fallen from grace. The world seems to have settled for "comfort and security" as the purpose of life. He cites a particularly poignant Charles Schultz cartoon as illustration: "Snoopy is complaining of his suffering from a feeling of meaninglessness and emptiness - when Charlie Brown comes in with a bowl full of dog food, and Snoopy exclaims - 'Ah Meaning!'" (p.82).

It doesn't take long, however, to discover that life is more than that. Physical comfort alone is not adequate, and so the search for meaning in our day turns inward. We are living in the midst of a cult of introspection. If meaning is no longer to be found in external structures or causes it must be inside somewhere, in the potential of my own personality. Each week a new gimmick is offered as the way to meaning: Transcendental Meditation, Sensitivity Training, Personal Growth, E.S.T., Yoga. The result, frequently, is selfishness becomes respectable: egotism now called self-actualization: adolescent self-indulgence baptized by some "guru" as fulfillment.

A very hopeful reaction has begun. Karl Jaspers once said: "What one is, he has become through that cause which he has made his own," and abraham Maslow, "the business of self actualization can best be carried out via commitment to an important job." (p.78). The author himself writes out of his experience in Nazi concentration camps. "Indeed, survival is dependent on direction. However, survival cannot be the supreme value. Unless life points to something beyond itself, survival is pointless and meaningless. It is not even possible. This is the very lesson I learned in three years spent in Auschwitz and Dachau." (Ibid. p. 139).

On Palm Sunday Jesus made some difficult decisions and laid His life on the line. In the process He gave us a new definition of what it means to be alive and human and fulfilled: it means to believe in someone or something enough to die. It means

that fulfillment, happiness, self-actualization, salvation - occurs when we decide to live for some purpose other than self. On Palm Sunday He acted out the profound summons of the Gospel - "he who would lose his life for my sake will find it." That's first. That ought to make us uncomfortable. That ought, also to call out of us a new, and deeper commitment.

The second lesson of the day is in the direction our commitment will take. Jesus came to the city: the biggest city: the capital city: the city as symbol of all that is best and worst about the human condition: the city of symphony orchestra and wretched slum: art gallery and pornographic magazine: Cathedral and Penitentiary: Temple and Sanhedrin. For twenty centuries Christians have tried desparately to act as if Jesus never came to Jerusalem: as if He provided one way tickets from the gentle,rolling hills of Galilee to the pearly Gates of Heaven. Religion, it seems, always points away from the city, away from life. Religion is inclined to be "other-worldly", and can depend on great popularity if it acts as if the harsh realities of the human city simply don't exist.

No one ever struggled with that more valiantly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. A recognized scholar, friends in America arranged for him to come to this country and spend the war teaching at a major university. Instead he made a lonely and difficult decision. He would go home: to his Jerusalem: to the place where the Gospel needed to be affirmed - Germany: there to die. In 1932, when the government was urging German pastors to stay out of politics and deal with matters of the spirit alone, Bonhoeffer preached a sermon in which he said: "One can have a marvelous time living as 'spiritual people'. As soon as life gets painful or oppressive, all you do is take off into the unencumbered 'heavenly places'...When this life is too difficult to cope with, who wouldn't opt for a better life beyond the skies...That is not the spirit of Jesus Christ.He does not lead man to an other-worldly religion; he gives him back the earth." (<u>The Expository Times</u>, Feb. 1977 p.147).

May I make what may seem to be a brash suggestion, but one which I regard as utterly faithful to the meaning of Palm Sunday - that the agenda for every church in Columbus, Ohio, this day, April 3, 1977, ought to be the city? May I suggest that the only way honestly to observe what happened on this day is to assume that the city of humanity is still the place where the Lordship of Jesus Christ must be affirmed? May I suggest that it would be faithless, on this day, to ignore the fact that this great city needs desperately the prayers, skills and commitment of all people of good will - and that the uncomfortable and difficult matter of resolving school desegregation is precisely the kind of arena into which followers of Jesus Christ will find themselves being led: precisely the kind of place He is either welcomed as Lord - or shouted down as trouble-maker?

In the middle of New York City's financial crisis the pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, Bryant Kirkland, announced a surprise offering in worship - for the city - and made the first contribution himself. I don't know if it was on Palm Sunday - but it was a gesture eloquently consistent with the meaning of this day.

The third lesson of Palm Sunday - and perhaps the most powerful of all - is personal. Life calls us on occasion from the tranquillity of Galilee to the danger of some Jerusalem. Whenever that happens, the promise of Palm Sunday is that our Lord Jesus Christ has gone before us.

As young people, facing an unknown future and the trauma of separation from home and parents and safety: Jesus Christ goes with us.

As adults, facing difficult vocational and family decisions that affect our lives and the lives of others: Jesus Christ goes with us.

Lying in a sleepless hospital bed at 4:30 a.m., waiting for surgery in the morning: Christ is with us.

Standing alone in the middle of important and influential people; torn between principles and expediency - Jesus Christ is with us.

And finally, walking that last road to Jerusalem, the lonely road into our own death: Jesus Christ has been there too and walks it again beside us.

As a matter of fact, we live most of our lives in some Jerusalem or another, the secular city, the city of commerce and politics, and difficult decisions and ethical dilemmas. Palm Sunday means that there is nowhere: no place - no situation, no matter how ambiguous, risky or dangerous that our Lord Jesus Christ will abandon us.

He rode into Jerusalem on the first day of the week. As we remember it and celebrate it, we are called to welcome Him again - as King - and Lord - and Savior: not in memory alone, however, but by following where we sense Him leading us: by taking our lonely, courageous stand, in the confidence, that He will always be with us.

Amen.

Father, on this day of triumph and shame, cut through our casual faith: stir us with the courage of our Lord: stir us to follow - even Jesus Christ.

Amen.